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ABSTRACT

A study quantitatively analyzed the frequency of English article deletion by Korean learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Subjects were 49 freshmen in a South Korean university. The absence of an article system in Korean induces usage errors in which learners ungrammatically either omit or add an article. The study especially focuses on the linguistic (article placement) and social factors (rural vs. urban background, gender) that influence deletion of both the definite and indefinite articles in the students' written English compositions. Results suggest article deletion is systematic and sensitive to both linguistic and social variables. Males deleted articles more than females, but no apparent difference resulted from regional background and there was no difference in deletion rate for definite and indefinite articles. (Contains 9 references.) (MSE)

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English Article Deletion in Korean EFL Learners' Compositions

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This study is a quantitative analysis of the frequency of English article deletion by Korean learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The absence of an article system in Korean induces usage errors where learners ungrammatically either omit or add an article. The study especially focuses on the linguistic and social factors which influence deletion of both the definite and indefinite article in the written compositions of Korean EFL learners. In general, the study suggests that there is a correlation of first language transfer and second language target effects in relation to social factors.

Introduction

There has been an increasing number of studies in the past few years regarding second language acquisition and sociolinguistics (Preston 1989:2). The acquisition of language itself implies the change and variation of language skills over time. This variation is systematic and reflects the learner's language development up to a specific stage. While some aspects of the second language system may be readily acquired, other aspects present difficulties to the learner. This holds especially true if the learner's native language system entirely lacks an aspect of the target language they are learning.

Systematic variation in second language learners has been incorporated in the theory of 'interlanguage' (Selinker 1969). The term interlanguage suggests that there is an intermediate language system which is deviant from the target language but is influenced by the native language (Selinker 1992:217). The deviations and variations are rule governed and can be accounted for in a systematic way. However, Young (1991:16) points out that the notion of 'system' in interlanguage is defined as a hypothetical relationship between interlanguage forms and the contexts in which they occur which may be explicitly stated and reduced to rules. In addition, he suggests that much variation may be due to surface level constraints imposed by the linguistic environment in which the forms occur.

Interlanguage is substantially influenced by the native language

(Selinker 1992:172). This influence may have positive or negative effects on the learner's language. If the native language of the learner is similar to the target language, learning may be enhanced or even impeded. However if the two languages do not have equivalent systems this may impair target language acquisition. For instance, in advanced learners, traces of interlanguage may become fossilized and lead to persistent errors (Selinker 1992:225). Structures considered difficult and marked in the target language will also be continuously problematic to the non-native learner. This will cause the near-native speaker to stay at a plateau stage without much further progress.

The Present Study

The present study focuses on the deletion rate of the English definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'a(n)' in adult native speakers of Korean. The acquisition of an article system is difficult and is often imperfect. One reason may be related to the fact that articles have no clear semantic function. The article is usually classified as an adjective and falls in the category of determiners because they always signal that a noun follows (Fowler & Aaron 1992:247). In addition, the absence of an article in many cases does not often provoke severe ungrammaticality or miscommunication. It is speculated that even native speakers of languages which possess an article system tend to delete articles when they do not regard them as absolutely necessary. In the case of the native speaker this would have to be considered a performance error.

In Korea, the dominant form of foreign language teaching is the grammar-translation method. Thus, students are trained in the passive skills of reading and writing with an emphasis on traditional grammar. However, this way of teaching greatly impairs the acquisition of the communicative aspects of the language. This may account for why Koreans excel on written examinations and do poorly on the other hand on speaking/listening evaluations. Therefore, written examples were elicited to test the contemplated efforts of the students and were thought to better reflect the subjects' level of performance than speech samples.

In Korea, the English article system is usually learned in the traditional descriptive grammar framework which offers the following generalizations (Fowler & Aaron 1992: 748-788):

1. 'The' is a definite article, it precedes a noun when the thing named is already known to the reader.

2. 'A' and 'an' are indefinite articles, they precede a noun when the thing named is not already known to the reader.

3. Use 'a(n)' with a singular count noun and do not use them with a plural noun.

4. Do not use 'the' with a plural noun or a mass noun when the noun refers generally to all representatives of what it names. Use 'the' when re-

ferring to one or more specific representatives of what the noun names.

The above generalizations may seem arbitrary to the learner whose native language lacks an article system. For instance, the definite article can be expressed by modifiers like demonstrative pronouns and the indefinite article by numeric modifiers.

The fact that the data is in written form may suggest that the register is formal and less resilient to variation. In this sense, the written form is considered static compared to the spoken form which is dynamic. However, this study suggests that errors in article usage are a persistent fossilized phenomena in second language learners and thus transcend the form of expression. The study is also the first to sociolinguistically quantify both social and linguistic factors concerned particularly with English article deletion.

The Data

The subjects in the present study were 49 freshmen students of the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Liberal Arts, at 'K' University in Seoul, Korea. All subjects have had 6 years of English education through secondary schooling. The backgrounds of the students are considered to be relatively uniform in that they all share the same native language and similar academic achievements.

In a demographic breakdown of the 49 subjects, 24 were male and 25 were female while 27 came from rural backgrounds and 22 came from urban backgrounds.

Table 1
Demographic analysis of subjects

Social Factors	Rural	Urban	Total
Male	17	7	24
Female	9	16	25
Total	26	23	49

A spontaneous written composition on the topic of 'My Freshman Lab Class' was elicited during a 50-minute time frame[1]. The students had no previous knowledge of the topic and were not permitted to access a dictionary. A familiar topic was used in order to eliminate such factors as lack of general knowledge and insufficient English skills regarding expression. There was no restriction on the length of the composition. However, the

[1] The data was collected on November 9, 1992.

length ranged from 1/2 to 2 pages.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the present study:

1. The rate of English article deletion will be considerably higher than the rate of article retention.

This is a generalization which was formed under the rationalization that the Korean language lacks an article system such as the one found in English and that it is considered difficult for second language learners to acquire this system (Santos 1987, Ahn 1992, Park 1992, Lee 1993). As there is no translation equivalent of the article in Korean, subjects may be influenced by their native language and delete rather than retain this form. This form would be considered marked to them in light of the absence of such a construction in their native language.

2. Males will delete the English article more than females.

It is a general belief that females are more sensitive to second language forms than males (Preston 1989:64). This in turn, leads to the speculation that women acquire second language more swiftly and more accurately than men. Therefore, the hypothesis that the males in this study would delete the English article more than females was proposed.

The factor group males vs. females was posited to show the effects of this social variable.

3. Subjects with rural backgrounds will delete the English article more than those with urban backgrounds.

This proposal was taken into consideration concerning a widespread belief that the schools in the urban areas of Korea offer a higher standard of education than the rural areas. This holds true in relation to the differences in the socio-economic status of people living in urban areas vs. rural areas found in Korea. In addition, a past history of high schools in urban areas having a higher required score on the high school entrance examination than rural schools also reflects this point. This is due to the basic intent urban schools have of preparing students for higher-level education. Lastly, there is a general tendency of well-qualified teachers to prefer urban schools to rural ones.

Thus, a second sociolinguistic variable of region which indicates a rural vs. urban background was posited.

4. The deletion rate of the English article will be higher if the articles precede a 'modifier + noun,' rather than directly preceding a noun.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the Korean language lacks an overt article system and instead incorporates this information in the use of prenominal modifiers. In Korean, the function of the English definite article 'the' is reflected in modifiers such as 'i, ceo, keu'.[2] On the other hand,

[2] The Yale Romanization system was used in transcribing Korean.

the English definite article which distinguishes singular and plural entities is expressed directly by cardinal numbers. Therefore, if a modifier is already present in the construction the learner may be affected by native language interference and consequently will not use an article. This can be seen in languages such as Korean which do not have an explicit article system.

The absence of an equivalent article system in Korean was chosen as one of the linguistic constraints concerning English article usage. The various factors selected to capture the constraints were whether the article preceded a modifier + noun, an adverb[3], or noun. In addition, in the case of the indefinite article 'a(n)' a distinction was made between count and mass nouns.

The study

The article errors in the compositions of the 40 subjects were analyzed and classified into those which occurred in the definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'a(n).' A total of 638 tokens was collected. The social variables looked at in this study were sex and region. The linguistic variables were chosen on the basis of the frequency of their appearance in the data corpus. Hence, the environments where the article was omitted[4] and where it was retained were noted.

A quantitative analysis was run on the tokens by using the MacVarb Variable Rule Program[5] This statistical program, which runs only on Macintosh computers, is a multivariate analysis tool. The program analyzes the significance of independent variables in relation to a dependent variable. Each independent variable is then given a weight which indicates whether that particular variable is significant or not in relation to the dependent variable. If the weight is closer to '1' this indicates that the variable is strongly significant, if the weight is closer to '0' this indicates that the factor is not significant.

Here, the dependent variable was the deletion rate of the English articles. The independent variables were the social variables and linguistic variables. An initial run and the results from the run are presented in the next section.

Results and discussion of quantitative analysis

In the first run on the data, the following factor groups which represent

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[3] The sequence of 'article + adverb' is distinguished from 'article + modifier + noun' in which the modifier implies an adjective. An example of an 'article + adverb' is found in 'a little' and 'the most.'

[4] The number of addition of article errors was insignificant . These errors were regarded as being instances of hyper-correction and overgeneralization of article usage. This phenomena did not prove detrimental in this study.

[5] This program was created by Gregory Guy in 1989.

variables were used in the MacVarb analysis.

Table 2
Factor groups in analysis

	Factors	
Factor Group 1	male	female
Factor Group 2	rural	urban
Factor Group 3	the + noun	a(n) + count noun
	the + adjective + noun	a(n) + mass noun
	the + adverb	a(n) + adjective + count noun
		a)n) + adjective + mass noun

Factor Groups 1 and 2 reflected the social variables and Factor Group 3 showed the linguistic constraints on the English article.

Hypothesis 1 which stated that the rate of English article deletion would be higher than retention proved false. Of the 638 tokens collected only 129 were instances of deletion. This consisted of a mere 20% rate of deletion. The subjects appeared to have a high level of proficiency concerning article usage. The emphasis on the written form of language in the English education they have received may have an effect on this matter. Thus, continuous exposure to grammar and written form may have sufficiently provided the setting for article acquisition. In addition, the subjects have had

Table 3
Probability of deletion rates

	Factor	MacVarb weight
Factor Group 1	male	0.55
	female	0.45
Factor Group 3	the + noun	0.34
	the + adjective + noun	0.50
	the + adverb	0.60
	a(n) + count noun	0.41
	a(n) + mass noun	0.58
	a(n) + adjective + count noun	0.52
	a(n) + adjective + mass noun	0.70
	a(n) + adverb	0.34

the chance to contemplate and correct mistakes because the samples were in written form. Therefore, they may have been consciously aware of the environments where the article must be retained.

Hypothesis 2 which stated that males would delete the English article more than females appears to have been borne out. This social variable of male/female proved significant in this run. Males showed a higher rate of deletion of the article at 0.55 than did their female counterparts at 0.45. However, Hypothesis 3 which stated that region-wise learners with a rural educated background would delete more those with an urban appeared to be insignificant. This factor group was thrown out during the analysis which indicates that it does not influence the rate of English article deletion in any way. Thus, the results suggest that there is no significant difference concerning the rural/urban distinction of the learner. This may be the result of the subjects having similar academic backgrounds in that they were mostly at similar levels of academic achievement in order to enter the particular university they were attending.

On the other hand, all the linguistic variables in Factor Group 3 showed significant results. A slight tendency was apparent in that the subjects seemed to delete the article more when it preceded an adjective or an adverb than when it preceded a noun. The most significant effect was found in the category where the following noun was a mass noun than when it was a count noun. These results support Hypothesis 4 which stated that the deletion rate would be higher when the English articles precede a 'modifier+noun' than just a 'noun.'

Results and discussion of modified quantitative analysis

An additional quantitative analysis was run in the form of a reanalysis of the factor groups used in the initial run. A modified run was conducted in order to determine the validity of the factor groupings in the initial run. Factor Group 3 (linguistic variables) from the initial analysis was modified so that the linguistic constraints were more finely distinguished. The first adjustment was in distinguishing between the definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'a(n).' The second adjustment was made to determine in

Table 4
Modified factor groups in reanalysis

	Factor	
Factor Group 1	male	female
Factor Group 2	rural	urban
Factor Group 3	definite article 'the'	indefinite article 'a(n)'
	article + noun	
	article + adjective + noun	
	article + adverb	
	a(n) + count noun	a(n) + mass noun

what contexts the article (definite and indefinite combined) was deleted. Lastly, in the case of the indefinite article 'a(n),' a comparison of whether the following noun was a count noun or a mass noun was reanalyzed.

The reanalysis provided additional support for Hypothesis 2 in that

Table 5
Probability of deletion in reanalysis

	Factor	MacVarb weight
Factor Group 1	male	0.56
	female	0.44
Factor Group 2	rural	0.52
	urban	0.48
Factor Group 3	definite article 'the'	0.46
	indefinite article 'a(n)'	0.54
Factor Group 4	article + noun	0.40
	article + adjective + noun	0.56
	article + adverb	0.54
Factor Group 5	article + count noun	0.39
	article + mass noun	0.61

males deleted the English article more than females. Hypothesis 3 which predicted that subjects from rural backgrounds would delete the article more than those from urban backgrounds was again falsified.

The new adjustments in the factor groups showed varied results. The reanalysis suggests that there was no significant difference in distinguishing between the definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'a(n).' Thus, the learners are prone to delete the article regardless of its particular grammatical usage. This also implies that the learners view articles in a general manner and group them as one category.

In regard to the linguistic constraints on the article, the reanalysis suggests that deletion is higher when the article precedes an adjective or an adverb than directly before a noun. This reinforces Hypothesis 4 which predicted that the article will be deleted more if it precedes a modifier than when a noun directly follows. In addition, in the case of the indefinite article 'a(n)' whether the noun following it is a count noun or a mass noun seems to influence the deletion rate. The subjects tend to delete the indefinite article more when it is followed by a mass noun. This triggering of deletion may be due to the notion of the general use of the indefinite article as an indicator of singular concrete nouns. In this sense, it may be difficult

for the Korean second language learner of English to relate the indefinite article to abstract entities.

Special treatment must be given to the factor of 'article + adverb.' The classification of this factor is questionable in regard to its grammatical category. This sequence seems to appear when the following word is a superlative form of an adjective or an adverb; for example; the most. These instances may be seen to be idiomatic in nature and hence render the grammatical category of the superlative form as a noun. However, the superlative form is regarded as an adverb in the present study.

Summary and conclusion

The data examined in the present study shows some of the various factors which may affect the deletion of the definite and indefinite article in foreign language learners of English. The result of the overall deletion being low suggests that the subjects have acquired the usage of the article system to a large degree and make errors when the use of the article is arbitrary and does not serve a grammatical function.

Deletion of the article appeared to be systematic and sensitive to both social and linguistic variables. Males deleted the article more than females but there was no apparent difference regarding the regional background of the subjects. Furthermore, there was no substantial difference in the deletion rates of the definite and indefinite article as was previously predicted.

The significant difference was in the linguistic environment which the article appeared in. There was a tendency towards higher deletion when the article preceded an adjective or an adverb than when it directly preceded a noun. This can perhaps be explained by native language influence where the role of the article is played by modifiers in the subjects' first language of Korean. Thus, since the place where an article should appear is already occupied with a modifier the subjects might have overlooked the fact that an article might be necessary in this context. In the case of the indefinite article, the deletion rate was higher when the article preceded a mass noun than when it preceded a count noun. This can be explained by the general definition of the indefinite article to denote the concept of singularity which mainly concerns count nouns.

It is concluded from the present study that the phenomena of article deletion in foreign language learners of English could in some ways be influenced by the learners' native language. In this particular case where the native language of the Korean learners lacks an equivalent article system of that found in their target language of English.

Further avenues of research may be to look at the deletion rate of English articles in speech and compare them with the rate found in written examples. This may reveal a holistic view of the language learner's performance. Although the social variables showed little effect, the linguistic constraints on English article deletion may provide some implications on why

learning of this aspect is difficult for learners. In short, this study tentatively suggests that English article deletion by Korean EFL learners may be influenced by both social and linguistic variables.

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